United Nations A/HRC/39/NGO/93

General Assembly

Distr.: General
31 August 2018

English only

**Human Rights Council**
**Thirty-ninth session**
10-28 September 2018
Agenda item 6
**Universal Periodic Review**

# Written statement* submitted by the World Evangelical Alliance, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[23 August 2018]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

GE.18-14419(E)
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# Cuba: UPR Recommendations Failed to Challenge Cuba to Improve Respect for Freedom of Religion or Belief

1. While several civil society reports[1] urged the UPR Working Group to address the situation of religious minorities in Cuba, it was a disappointment that no recommendations challenged Cuba to improve its record in that area, despite the fact that international standards are far from being met. Three recommendations from India (6.176), Mozambique (6.191) and United Arab Emirates (6.207) merely asked to "continue" current policies in relation to freedom of religion

2. In this context, the World Evangelical Alliance would like to reiterate that religious minorities such as the Protestant Evangelical Christians are confronted to severe restrictions. New instances of harassment took place since the UPR. Cuba's attitude of mistrust and control towards the Evangelical Churches is all the more regrettable as these communities are respectful of the rule of law and of the authorities and they put themselves at the service of the common good and society. The World Evangelical Alliance would like to ask the members of the Human Rights Council to keep the religious freedom situation on its radar and to ask Cuba to take measures to meet its obligations.

### The situation of Protestant Evangelical communities

3. Evangelical Protestants have an increasing share of the population, estimated at more than 10%. It is estimated that there are more than 1,200,000 Evangelical Protestants in Cuba, while some estimate that it could reach 1,800,000, if non-formally affiliated Evangelical Christians are included. In fact, many of them are not active members of a church to avoid exposing themselves, which explains these variations in the estimates. Cuba has a population of about 11,500,000, which means that at least 10% of the Cuban population are Evangelical believers.

4. Three types of situations for Evangelical Churches in Cuba can be distinguished according to their level of relationship with the government, respectively, their level of persecution.

### Protected churches

5. Since 1959, Cuba has tried to secure the support of established churches, sometimes by force. Churches accepting the liberation theology are close to the State and have favorable conditions. They represent 8% of evangelical protestants in Cuba.

### Repressed churches

6. Denominations present in Cuba before 1959 but unwilling to affiliate with the Cuban Church Council have suffered severe persecution in the past century (confiscation of seminary, prison sentences for pastors, etc.) They represent 80% of Evangelicals in Cuba. They do not have the same favors as the protected churches. The government has refused to allow for the creation of the "Cuban Evangelical Alliance". Being tolerate but not recognized, many communities meet illegally in house churches, because they do not receive construction permits or authorization to gather in larger places. They face confiscation, demolition and their leaders can be arrested.

7. In January 2015, the Cuban government announced Decree Law 322, which amends the General Housing Law, which is supposed to regulate private property laws and zoning, but Cuban authorities have used Decree Law 322 to threaten evangelical communities of expropriation. The Cuban Evangelical League was targeted with the confiscation of hundreds of houses that served as a place of worship and the obligation to pay fines. These houses usually belonged to the leaders of the congregations. In the same way, the Assemblies of God saw 2,000 places of worship declared illegal in 2015, with a demolition order if they did not accept confiscation peacefully. Some of these buildings were destroyed, which led to public protests in front of the offices of the Communist Party of Cuba in several provinces where hundreds of leaders gathered, asserting their right to religious freedom. At present, there are still several congregations that are in danger of being destroyed and confiscated, as is the case with the Church of Columbus in the Matanzas province belonging to the Assemblies of God. Many other denominations are in a similar situation.

[1] See UPR reports from ADF International, Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Patmos Institute.

8. Several pastors have been arrested and later released, such as Baptist Pastor Lleonar Barroso (arrested on 20 March 2016 and who later fled out of Cuba) or Pastor Leanardo Rodriguez (7 April 2016, released on the following day).

**Illegal and persecuted churches**

9. Churches established after 1959 in Cuba are considered illegal and face the most severe persecution. They represent 12% of Cuban Evangelicals. Some are in the country since over 30 years but are still unable to register with the ministry of justice. There places of meeting are destroyed, and their leaders arrested. Thus, 4 places of worship of the Apostolic movement were destroyed in 2016, their material confiscated, etc. Those places of worship were built on the private properties of the pastors and had legal construction permits. Dozens of pastors of these churches are regularly harassed and arrested. Some have been sentenced, such as pastor Núñez Velázquez on October 2016 (1-year house arrest).

**Recommendations**

10. In this context, the World Evangelical Alliance asks that members of the Human Rights Council raise the issue of freedom of religion in their discussions with Cuba. We also ask the Cuban government to implement the following recommendations:

- Fully guarantee freedom of religion or belief to all and combat all forms of discrimination against religious communities;
- Put an end to the arrests of religious leaders and believers, as well as the destruction of places of worship;
- Recognize the Evangelical Alliance of Cuba so that churches not affiliated with the Council of Churches in Cuba can maintain relations with the government as well;
- Regularize the situation of house churches and communities forced to gather clandestinely, and authorize the construction of places of worship;
- Guarantee religious freedom to believers belonging to denominations established in Cuba after 1959.